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### Povestea unui lutier

#### Rezumat

De câte ori auzim glasul unui cântec, suntem tentați să atribuim măiestria doar ceterașului și interpretului vocal. Cunoaștem multe cupluri muzicale maramureșene care și-au făurit un nume cu cetera și zongora, dar prea puțin cunoaștem care sunt acei meșteri anonimi din mâinile cărora ies aceste instrumente ce sună atât de duios, atingându-ne sufletul cu strunele ce plâng în glas de vioară. Uităm însă să ne amintim și de lutier. Și cum nimic nu e întâmplător în lume aceasta, ne-a fost dat să cunoaștem un Om adevărat, lutierul Ion Ghereben din Sarasău, unul dintre cei mai prolifici făuritori de vioară din Maramureș care a promovat și promovează acest nobil meșteșug atât în comunitatea sa, în județul Maramureș, cât și în comunitatea de români din S.U.A. și totodată i-a uimit pe americani cu viorile ieșite din mâinile sale sau cu dibăcia cu care repară instrumentele muzicale (viori, viole, violoncele, chitari, contrabași) de peste 40 de ani.

La 20 iunie 1999 îi este recunoscută valoarea sa de lutier talentat și are onoarea și marea șansă de a participa în America la Washington DC însoțit de către muzicologul clujean dr. Zamfir Dejeu, la Smithsonian Folklife Festival, unde a prezentat construcția unei vioară de mână. Mănuiește cu măiestrie arcușul unei vioară, mângâie corzile zongorei, mai alinând dorul românilor plecați de multă vreme pe alte meleaguri. În S.U.A. i se spune John Stradivarius of Sarasău și este meșterul și artistul recunoscut atât pe plan național cât și în Statele Unite ale Americii și tocmai în aceasta constă unicitatea sa.

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**Keywords:** luthier, violin, Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Stradivarius.

## The Story of a Luthier

### Summary

Whenever we hear the sound of a song, we are tempted to attribute the mastery only to the violinist and the vocalist. We know many musical couples from Maramureş who have made a name for themselves with the cetera (violin) and zongora (piano), but we know too little about those anonymous craftsmen from whose hands come out these instruments that sound so tender, touching our souls with the crying string of the violin sound. But we forget about the violin maker. And since nothing is accidental in this world, we were introduced to a real man, luthier Ion Ghereben from Sarasău, one of the most prolific violin makers in Maramureş who promoted and promotes this noble craft both in his community, in Maramureş County, as well as in the Romanian community in the USA and at the same time he amazed the Americans with the violins made by him or with the skills with which he repairs the musical instruments (violins, violas, cellos, guitars, double basses) for over 40 years.

On June 20, 1999, he is recognized for his talent as a valued luthier, having the honour and the great chance to participate in Washington DC, USA, accompanied by the musicologist from Cluj, Dr. Zamfir Dejeu, at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, where he presented the construction of a violin. He skillfully handles the bow of a violin, caresses the strings of the zongora, and alleviates the longing of the Romanians who have long been gone for other lands. In the USA he is called John Stradivarius of Sarasau, and he is a nationally recognized craftsman and artist both in the United States and nationally, and this is where his uniqueness lies.

## The Story of a Luthier

Yellow violin,  
Your voice swings me,  
Violin with three strings  
Your voice takes me in the world...

Whenever we hear the sound of a song, we are tempted to attribute the mastery only to the violinist and the vocalist. We know many musical couples from Maramureş who have made a name for themselves with the *cetera* (violin) and zongora (guitar), but we know too little about those anonymous craftsmen from whose hands these instruments that sound so tender come out, touching our souls with the strings crying in the sound of a violin. But we forget about the violin maker. That skilful craftsman creator of the *cetera*, in whose shell hides those magical vibrations, which at the first caress of the bow wraps our souls with an enchanting fragrance.

Since nothing is accidental in this world, we were introduced to a real master of the craft, luthier Ion Ghereben from Sarasău, one of the most prolific violin makers in Maramureş who promoted and promotes this noble craft both in his community, in Maramureş County, as well as in the Romanian community in the USA and at the same time impressing the Americans with his violins or with the skills with which he repairs the musical instruments (violins, violas, cellos, guitars, double basses) for over 40 years.

I learned from him the secrets of a violin created by him. Ion Gherben, son of the Historical Land of Maramureş, grew up in close contact with Mother Nature. This developed his sense of responsibility not to disrespect nature. The violin maker also revealed how the ancient luthiers chose their wood for the making of the instrument. As a child, Ion climbed the mountain with his father in the snowy winter when the trees didn't have sap. With great care, using no special tools, only a hammer to peel the tree, the bark of the sycamore maple is removed from a small area. The more curves of the wood fiber, the convexity of the sycamore wood gives the violin superior acoustic properties. The wood must grow on top of the mountain, so the fibers are more uniform, and the annual wood rings are closer. This is the best wood to make instruments from it.

The violin is made of a living element. We choose the sycamore maple a deciduous wood, and spruce. The construction of the instrument is a miracle. You laugh and cry at the same time while making it. Your soul laughs when you see the gratitude of the musician who tries the violin made by you. You need to have more qualities to be able to practice this profession. That includes, a skilled carpenter, to see the structure of the wood, a good

mechanic, a good turner and a little bit of a musician to know how to tune the instrument. The luthier explains: “You must know how to choose the resonant wood, curly sycamore maple, which is typically used on the back, ribs and neck. The top of the violin or the resonance is made of spruce, and it must have no knots because knots disturb the sound. Special wood for musical instruments should be cut in winter when there is no sap in the wood. You look for the most beautiful one. I already know which one is it without carving into the bark. The best sycamore maple for musical instruments is the one that grows from the rocks. Once I have found the right wood, I bring it home, split it in two or four smaller pieces and put them to dry in the shade. The acoustic areas must be respected otherwise there is a risk that the violin will not sound perfect. The top should be one millimeter thinner than the back.



Atelierul lui Ion Ghereben de la Sarasău; Foto: din colecția lui Ion Ghereben

He learned craftsmanship from his father at a young age, Nuțu Ghereben, and from his father’s friend, Nuțu lu Pătru from Iapa. His father organized folk dances for the youth of the village. He was orphaned by his father at the age of seven, went through many difficulties, but this talent helped him succeed in life. Ion Ghereben remembers how he

learned the secrets of luthiery: “My father made bows and bow heels and repaired instruments. He also had a friend, Nuțu lu Pătru from Iapa. He taught me many secrets about arranging the F-Holes, the bridge and the tying of the strings.

I was 7 and half years old when my father died. Aged 14, I started repairing violins. I was fortunate enough to work in my father’s workshop. One day, Nuțu lui Pătru from Iapa came and brought a box of bone glue put it in water on the edge of the stove, it warmed up quickly. I learned many tricks from him. And I asked him how certain things are done and he always told me with great pleasure. I have learned many secrets from the musicians near Baia Mare, from the villages of Chioar and Codru. I learned from Ignat Balog from Sălsig, “Didica”, very talented, Alexandru Horváth, János Rosztás, Ilie Lăcătuș, Tiberiu Baghi.”

Ion started repairing violins in Sarasău, then in Iapa, Săpânța and in other neighbouring villages.

He worked in Tileag, Bihor County as a furniture carver for export to the Netherlands. «The head of the workshop was also a luthier. He made classical violins and horn violins. One week when we didn’t have much work to do, he repaired some violins and I told him that I also know how to repair one. He said, “Come on let me teach you how to make a violin.” “And he showed me a sketch. A violin is divided into 72 equal parts according to the Italian School. You need to know geometry well. Thus, I learned how to make horn violins too. ”»

Ion Ghereben builds violins respecting the following stages: choosing the wood, smoothing it, glueing and designing of contour, cutting the bottom plate and lid of the violin, cutting and forming the ribs, packing the body of the violin, making and assembling the neck of the violin and the bridge, assembling the strings and tuning.

Since adolescence, the master luthier from Sarasău played the cetera (violin), zongora (guitar) and dobă (drums). He was also a dance instructor he trained two generations of dancers in 1990, respectively between the years 1997-1998. Since 1986 he has sung at weddings and baptisms in Maramureș. He tells us with great pain that he also agreed to sing at the funeral of a young man buried with a flag, in groom attire, an event that marked him very much.

In 1982 he started singing with the Iza group. He also went filming with the members of the group where he took one or two violins to sell.

Starting in 1988, Ion Ghereben went to Bucharest every two years to repair instruments. “I had a family in Bucharest. The gentleman was a concertmaster at the Radio Orchestra in Bucharest, Mihai Stoicescu. I received a room from him, separate from his house. I was repairing instruments there. ”

Also, every two years, he went to Slatina in Olt County to repair instruments. “In Slatina, I had a family too, Costel Duță lui Ristea. There I also had a room of my own. The Duță family was a large family of musicologists from Oltenia. Mr Duță started the ensemble *Plaiurile Oltului*, whose conductor was Marin Constantin, a violinist who played on the left, so, I made him a left-hand violin. I was also known in this southern part of the country. I had requests to make violins and repair violins and cellos.”

In the '90s, he moved back home until 1998 and taught his nephew, his older brother's son, Călin Ghereben, to make violins and repair musical instruments. The nephew came every day and sat next to him, curious, interested and eager to learn. His nephew also ensures the continuity of the work of the luthier Ion Ghereben.

Until 1999 he worked in his father's workshop. He made violins tested, appreciated and bought by famous musicians from Maramureș: Gheorghe Florea - violinist in Poienile Izei. He sold violins to good instrumentalists from Ieud, who are lăutari (fiddlers) from father to son. He sold in Moisei too. His violins were also appreciated and bought in Bucharest.

On June 20, 1999, he was recognized as a valued luthier, having the honour and the great chance to participate in Washington DC, USA, accompanied by the musicologist from Cluj, Dr Zamfir Dejeu, at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, where he presented the construction of a violin. He also accompanied the Voivozii Ensemble from Cuhea, Maramureș County on the violin. At the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, the power of culture builds understanding and strengthens the connection between human communities.

The Smithsonian Folklife Festival is a research and education unit that promotes a better understanding and sustainability of cultural heritage in the United States and around the world through research, education, and community involvement. Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings initiates cultural sustainability programs, exhibitions, documentaries and videos, symposia, publications and educational materials. It also maintains the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, conducts research focused on ethnographic and cultural heritage policy, and offers educational opportunities through scholarships, internships, and training programs. The centre's activities are funded by federal loans, Smithsonian trust funds, contracts and agreements with national state and local governments, foundation grants, gifts from individuals and corporations, festival revenue, and sales of Folkways products.

After the festival, Ion Ghereben decides to stay in the United States for 23 years. He was established in New York, where he managed to impress an entire world with his violins that sound so melodious!

Thus, Ion Ghereben ends up transmitting traditional cultural models both in the community he belongs to in Sarasău, and in the United States where he is recognized both nationally and overseas. In September 1999, he sold his first violin in America, a violin made at home, in his modest workshop in the Historical region of Maramureș. The violin was bought by a business manager who appreciated his work. This was the entry into the American world, after which he sold 28 more violins with the "label" of Sarasău.

He brought them to America unfinished and finished them and sold them at the store. "Some subway musicians came to me and bought a violin of mine and asked me all sorts of questions. I would find out that they had studied at the Music Academy, had a Master's degree and PhD in music and preferred to play the subway! And I was proud to see that they bought a violin of mine! "

In July 2001, his workshop moved from Sarasau to New York! He makes his first

violin in America! A violin made by the master Ion Ghereben can be heard from a great distance, the secret is in the acoustic areas of the violin. The luthier confesses that he combined the styles of Stradivarius, Maggini, Guarneri, and Andrea Amati, taking from each one what was most beautiful in order to create his appreciated model of violin. He made over 200 violins, appreciated by folk music performers from Maramureș, by the



Atelierul de lucru din America; Foto: din colecția Ion Ghereben

Romanian community from the USA, and by foreigners who purchased 100 of his instruments at Sam Ash Music Manhattan. It is appreciated both by folk music instrumentalists and by those of classical music. In his workshop in America, he also repairs musical instruments. He restored a Stradivarius in 2017.

Listening to his life story, our souls resembled. We learned the secrets of a violin that came out of his hands, laughed heartily and wept while listening to the life story of great talent, with a rich musical culture who left Romania 23 years ago.

He skillfully handles the bow of a violin, caresses the strings of the zongora, and alleviates the longing of the Romanians who have long been gone for other lands. In the United States, he is called John Stradivarius of Sarasău “They call me John Stradivarius at the Cultural Music Center in New York and at the Lincoln Center too. At one of my sales at Sam Ash Music Manhattan, a guy shows up and asks, “Do you have Stradivarius? Jokingly he tapped me on the shoulder and said, “This is Mister John Stradivarius of Sarasău!”

Ion Ghereben participates in the United States at cultural activities organized by the Romanian community. He sings at weddings, baptisms, and various social events. He sang with his wife Florentina and Petre Giurgi in Washington D.C., and with the musician, Gheorghe Tomoiagă from Moisei settled in America. He sang for his friends from Bihor (Romania) in Seattle. He participated in various cultural events in Chicago, Michigan, Detroit, Atlanta, and Georgia.

Rigorous and thorough analysis indicates the luthier as an excellent connoisseur in the field due to his own experience. On the one hand, he himself is an instrumentalist (he has been playing the zither, zongora and doba since 1982, accompanying the famous ensembles and musical groups from Maramureş). His talent, skill and ability also recommend him repairing stringed musical instruments. The sound of his violins can be heard from Sarasău to Poienile Izei, from Ieud to Moisei and from Washington DC to New York, Michigan, Detroit, Georgia, Atlanta and Seattle.

The scientific researcher Zamfir Dejeu says: “Ion Ghereben always had love for wood and sought to give it life through his talent as a violin maker. I met Ion Ghereben in full artistic maturity in 1999 when he participated with the folk group from Bogdan Vodă (Cuhea), Maramureş, at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. He proved that from being a craftsman after years of experience you can become a master. The fact that he learned how to choose quality wood – curly sycamore maple, grown on the cliff, for the bottom of the violin, and spruce for the top (of course without knots), how to cut wood in winter when there is no sap in it, that dries in the shade, how is the wood prepared, how it is dimensioned, how it is sanded to resonate and other details such as the fact that the front must be one millimeter thinner than the back, resulted in the manufacture of valuable violins. He now lives by the noble work he does with pleasure. He is persevering and masterfully consistent. He has built almost 40 violins so far. Some of the greatest violinists from Maramureş play the violins of Ion Ghereben: Tudorovici Nicolae, Gheorghe Florea.”

We also talked to the talented Maramureş classicist Gheorghe Tomoiagă, established

in the USA, a good friend of the luthier: «My name is Gheorghe Tomoiagă, a violinist from Maramureș, Gheorghe from the Valleys. I am a folklorist and a classicist, with studies in Composition, Musicology and Pedagogy, mastering different musical styles and about 10 musical instruments (keyboard, strings, etc.). I met Ion Ghereben from Sarasău about 35 years ago, much younger, simple musicians of those times, through “accidental” meetings, then singing with mutual friends in Sighetu Marmăției, through the villages on Iza valley, Borșa etc.

Our relationship was strengthened through a mutual friend, a relative of Ion, a great violinist from Dragomirești, Ionu Bondrii when we discovered three of his great gifts: the luthier, zongorașul (the guitarist) and dobașul (the drummer). All these gifts, united in the musician with sharp senses, leading the melody of the violin and as “accompanist” we, the closest people, often calling him “Metronome”, he can “keep in check” not only a Taraf band, but an entire orchestra, which even if it wanted to, couldn’t get out of rhythm.

Over the years, meeting him in America, we often sang even if the distances where we live or the requirements of the guests exceeded hundreds or thousands of kilometers.

Although a collector’s instrument made by the master hand, along with two others, which I am proud of, singing with honour both folklore and classical music. His instruments have a special resonance, accumulating a balanced melody, doubled by a force that only he and God could explain. I was in his workshop many years ago. It is a *sui generis* “exhibition” of materials and tools but an archive of folklore and traditional objects of a beauty for which you can hardly find words. Since those years, I have given it a soul name, even though we are not of blood, calling it Aunt Mărie from Sarasău, thus sealing a reputation. With due respect, Gheorghe Tomoiagă, a Romanian-American citizen, established in the state of Virginia U.S.A., from Moiseiul Maramureșului, after the popular name of the rest of Gheorghe from the Valleys”, known as 7 villages, member of three local symphony orchestras in America.

Luthier Ion Ghereben gladly announced us that this autumn he will return to Romania for good to continue his work as a maker of the most wonderful stringed instrument, in his small village community of Sarasău.